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**The Triumph of Empathy: Its Redemptive Role in**

**Ginsberg’s “Howl” and O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find”**

A shortcoming in the worlds described in “Howl” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is the absence of empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It is lost when people become distracted by themselves and superficialities and so it is a victim of the selfishness that dominates in both works. Ultimately, both works contain a spiritually satisfying progression towards empathy which is only made possible fully understanding another person: in “Howl” this is Allen Ginsberg’s friendship with Carl Solomon, in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, it is the grandmother’s discovery of her likeness to the Misfit.

“Howl” itself is deeply empathetic, but who it declares itself in solidarity with, are those men and women who have lost their connections with other people in their desperate self-minded search for spiritual gratification. However, the poem is affirmative because the narration evolves from an observation of these people, to a cry of solidarity with them. “A Good Man is Hard to Find” also ends in the triumph of empathy, after illustrating what the modern world is like when people are distracted by superficiality and by themselves, when they don’t care for others.

Part I of “Howl” is a catalogue of the reactions to the alienated modernity of the 1950s. Written in 1955, it is a lament for the marginalized, whom Ginsberg names “the best minds of my generation” in the first line. Out of a burning desire for “the ancient heavenly connection” (Ginsberg 62), they engage in drug use, self-directed violence and licentious behavior—whatever can offer an immediate sense of transcendence from reality and connection to others. However, “Howl” is a lament of this escapism that offers only a superficial spiritual distraction that only further alienates the user from affirming relationships.

This alienated modernity, the reactions to it, and Ginsberg’s lament, are driven not only by people’s internal despair, but also by the external impulse of society’s evils. In answer to the question of what “bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” (Ginsberg 68), Ginsberg directs his fury at the figure of Moloch. Part II of “Howl” is a denunciation of the corruption in society, which is sublimated into the image of the ancient god Moloch, who is a symbol of sacrifice. Moloch is made of the vast stone of war, the stunned government, and has a mind of pure machinery and blood made of running money—everything that limits human expression and free will, and objectifies a person. Moloch is militarism, materialism, even rationality—everything that underpins the American ideal of post-war middle class society. And so Moloch is responsible for the devolution of the brightest minds into the madness of self-interest.

Their fate is concluded in the rest of the first line—these minds are “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked”. The desire for spiritual satisfaction and the gratification of physical and sexual impulses leads to madness because it is self-destructive, and occurs at the loss of enduring interpersonal relationships. They bounce between the extremes of alienating isolation and self-negating absorption into humanity: between pursuing private vision through the streets alone and indulging fleeting and anonymous free love yet always “leaving no broken hearts” (Ginsberg 63). The real consequences are that some of Ginsberg’s friends end up dead, some end up in asylums, and all check out of society. This becomes a world without any room for empathy, in which a search for connection and spirituality leads to self-destruction.

Ultimately, what does lead to connection and spirituality is the belief of empathy. The catalogue of despair in Part I approaches nihilism until "nothing but a hopeful little bit of hallucination" (Ginsberg 67) is left. What immediately follows this hopeful hallucination is Ginsberg’s sudden declaration that “Ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe” (Ginsberg 67). In the midst of this howl of psychic pain, Ginsberg’s thoughts turn to the friend he met when they were both patients at a mental asylum in Rockland, New York.

Part III is a rousing address to this friend, Carl Solomon. The dearness of this friendship is evident in the affectionate tone. The empathetic refrain “I’m with you in Rockland” is repeated nineteen times, and each of the intervening lines demonstrate a keen understanding of Carl’s personal struggles. Here, “Howl’s” images of destruction are replaced by an awakening and a hope, ending not with desolation but with connection. In the final line, Ginsberg tells Carl, “In my dreams you walk dripping from a sea—journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western light” (Ginsberg 70). This is significant as the only successful journey in the poem. Many journeys are described in Part I—many of the people Ginsberg met travel widely in search for various answers. Searching for ideas, they “drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision” (Ginsberg 66), or searching for drugs, they “walked all night with their shoes full of blood…waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steam-heat and opium” (Ginsberg 65). But here Carl journeys in Ginsberg’s dream to his cabin, motivated by nothing but the desire to be together. The only belief that rewards is not a religious or spiritual longing, but the power of empathy—the cry that triumphs is “I’m with you in Rockland”.

The growth of empathy is carried through the speaker himself. Ginsberg begins as an observer—this poem begins “I saw”. But by the end of Part III, he is a participant—he is in Rockland with Carl, and the final image is a product of his own dream. This is reflected in the progression of the speaker’s pronoun from the singular I (“I saw”) to the plural we, which appears in the second- and third-to-last lines of Part III.

The last section is an ecstatic cry of solidarity with humanity and a redemption for every person: “Everything is holy! Everybody’s holy!” (Ginsberg 71). “Howl” ends in an ecstatic celebration of the holiness that manifests in everything. Out of negation and a descent into perversity there comes a salvation that is borne from Ginsberg’s empathy for the people he meets, and the understanding he shares with his friend Carl.

As in “Howl”, the dominant emotional progression in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is also towards empathy. This is experienced by the main character, the grandmother, and separately, by the reader.

The oppositional forces are not as explicit as those described in “Howl”, but they are just as entrenched. Characters are not harmed by any figure of oppression such as Ginsberg’s Moloch but by their own lack of belief. The lack of empathy perpetuated by the Misfit, the members of the family, and the grandmother herself contribute to a general alienation of modernity. Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of another person, and this is briefly grasped only in the climax of the story by the grandmother.

While the Misfit is the most morally consistent character, and the one most concerned with morality, he is least guided by a belief in empathy. He lacks empathy because he doesn’t care about other people. Empathy is a pillar of a morality which attributes the principles of respect to every person, and his cynical worldview opposes these traditional ethics. The Misfit’s cynical worldview is produced from his despair at the deceit of religion. Christianity demands goodness from its followers, yet Jesus was the first good man and he was crucified. Having reached this hopeless understanding of the world, any belief in empathy is extinguished by an “anti-belief” in violence and destruction. The Misfit believes that violence is the only force which uncovers a person’s true nature—violence is essential for an authenticity which is lacking in the modern world. Explaining his philosophy of life, he says, “There’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness” (O’Connor 2111). This belief, for which the absence of empathy is necessary, allows the Misfit to murder an innocent family without guilt or regret.

A different type of lack of empathy is presented in the way the characters are preoccupied by themselves. Not only does this prevent a sense of empathy between characters, but O’Connor’s unsympathetic portrayal of the family makes it challenging for the reader to empathize with the characters. The children, John Wesley and June Star, are selfish and disrespectful. June Star responds rudely to Red Sam’s wife’s friendly invitation to live with her by saying, “I wouldn’t live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!” (O’Connor 2104). Bearing neither respect nor love for their parents, both children disregard all commands or expectations. Focused on their desire for gratification, they don’t care about their parents or about other people. But this is not even shocking to the reader, because the parents are less capable of understanding others, or of being understood. Neither of the parents have personalities—Bailey’s most outstanding trait is his lack of authority, and his wife, always referred to as merely the “children’s mother”, does not even have a name. Impotent and never once pursuing a belief, the parents are more like objects than subjects. Even in their moments of most outrageous suffering—when they are coolly murdered by the Misfit’s men—O’Connor still keeps them at a distance. Their deaths, kept out of sight in the forest, are signaled to the reader only by the far-off sounds of gunshots. Through these emotional and physical distances, O’Connor makes it difficult for the reader to identify with, and therefore empathize with, the family. This heightens a feeling of a cold and sterile world.

The sense that, in this cold and sterile post-war society, each man must fend for himself, and not for others, is described explicitly by the characters themselves. At The Tower, Red Sam, his wife, and the grandmother discuss the disruption of moral order in society. “A good man is hard to find”, Red Sam says in agreement with his wife’s declaration that “It isn’t a soul in this green world of God’s that you can trust” (O’Connor 2104). Mistrust between individuals, even between man and wife (Red Sam’s wife makes it clear that even he isn’t exempt from her doubt), now defines community, and this is makes it difficult for people to maintain a belief in empathy.

More than any other character, the grandmother emphasizes and contributes to all these qualities which contribute to an alienated modernity: a lack of empathy for other characters and failure to invoke empathy from the reader. Her belief in religion and her own “goodness” perpetuate this sterile world because her piety is false. She tries to present herself as a good Christian woman but it is only an image and a product of her excessive sentimentality. The grandmother is concerned with image, at the cost of authenticity. Before the road trip, she writes down the mileage so she can have something interesting to say about how far they drove later—from the beginning she is manufacturing what she wants out of the experience. She dresses up for the trip, so that “anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (O’Connor 2102), and reveals in a conversation with her grandchildren that she wishes she had married an old suitor, Mr. Teagarden, because he grew to be a wealthy gentleman. Both admissions show the extreme extent to which she values appearance over character—and in fact equates the two. This complacency with accepting superficial images is another impediment to empathy, which demands a more rigorous understanding of a person.

Not only are her values revealed to be superficial, but her false goodness is also undermined by her selfishness, which is antithetical to empathy. She uses manipulation to reach her selfish goals. Wanting to go to East Tennessee instead of Florida so she can visit her friends, she tries to make her son feel guilty by saying, “I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did” (O’Connor 2101). But when the family actually crosses path with the Misfit, she hypocritically puts her own safety before that of her son, his wife, and her grandchildren. She never tries to appeal of behalf of her family, but only asks that the Misfit not shoot a lady, referring only to herself.

The grandmother progresses to a point where, stimulated by violence, her belief becomes sincere. Once her family has been killed, she accepts that she will die. As the Misfit talks about his loss of faith in humanity, the grandmother’s “head cleared for an instant”—in understanding his flaw, she discovers the Misfit is just like her, and tells him “Why, you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (O’Connor 2111). In this moment she discovers the grace of empathy. By realizing and accepting her kinship with the Misfit, she shows an understanding of her flaws as well as his. An instance of true empathy requires an understanding of another person. To understand how you relate to another person, also requires an understanding of yourself. Distracted by self-interest and her adherence to superficial appearance, the grandmother possessed neither an interest in people outside of herself nor an honest understanding of her own self. In her final moment, she gains both and dies an authentic person, having achieving the goodness she once pretended.

Works Cited

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